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SINO-VATICAN RELATIONS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (C-AL6-01115)

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Classified By: Acting E/P Chief Jeff Zaiser; Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. On July 31, Reverend Chan Kim-kwong, Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council (HKCC) told poloff that the issue of Sino-Vatican relations had moved beyond the State Council's purview and was currently being deliberated by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, with meetings chaired by President Hu Jintao. Chan said some of his Vatican contacts believed that Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen had "sabotaged" Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli's visit to Beijing last month, through a premature leak to the media, due to his concern that the Vatican was rushing to negotiate with the PRC. Zen wanted more personal influence on the Vatican's China policy, but was not part of the Pope's "inner circle" of China policy advisors. Chan observed that implementation of new regulations intended to ease registration of religious organizations in the mainland had been mixed at best, primarily because officials at the local and provincial levels paid little or no attention to religious issues. Chan also noted the recent "promotion of Buddhism" by Chinese officials as a possible area of concern, especially if preferential treatment of Buddhism would come at the expense of other religions operating in China. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: It was clear in previous discussions with the papal representative in Hong Kong that the Vatican Foreign Ministry was upset by Zen's leak of Celli's visit to Beijing, which the representative attributed to Zen's "misunderstanding" of the confidential nature of the trip. However, Chan's comments suggest that Zen may be much more "media savvy" than some observers had believed. End Comment.

¶3. (C) On July 31, poloff discussed mainland religious freedom issues and Sino-Vatican relations with Reverend Chan Kim-kwong, Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council (HKCC). In addition to his prominent position within the Protestant organization, Chan also is an Honorary Research Fellow of the University Services Center for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and has published papers on Sino-Vatican and PRC religious issues. This is the first of two cables reporting on poloff's July 31 meeting with Chan.

President Hu In Charge of Sino-Vatican Relations

14. (C) Sino-Vatican relations were in a deadlock, said Chan. Discussion of the issue had now moved beyond the State Council's purview and was currently being deliberated by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. These meeting were chaired by President Hu Jintao.

Zen and the Vatican

15. (C) Chan, who has contacts within the Vatican through his previous research on Sino-Vatican issues, said some of his Vatican contacts believed Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen had "sabotaged" Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli's visit to Beijing last month. Chan said Zen was more concerned about the state of religious freedom in China and did not "like" former Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano's approach to Sino-Vatican negotiations. Zen wanted to have more personal influence on the Vatican's China policy, but he was not part of the Pope's "inner circle" of China policy advisors. Because of his concern over the Vatican's "rush" to negotiate normalization of Holy See-PRC ties, Zen deliberately "prematurely leaked" news of Celli's visit to Beijing, which many Vatican officials had hoped would be a "breakthrough mission." Celli and Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi already had bought their tickets and were prepared to leave for Beijing when Zen's comments about a Vatican delegation already in Beijing were published in the media. In an effort to make it appear that Zen's information had been incorrect, Celli and Graziosi delayed their trip by two days. In the meantime, however, the Chinese were clearly upset by the media leak, gave the Vatican delegation a "cold reception" upon arrival in Beijing, and only scheduled a five-minute meeting with the Vice Foreign Minister. Both sides signified their unhappiness by making no official announcements upon conclusion of the visit.

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16. (C) The Pope's March 27 ceremony for the 15 newly elevated cardinals was another example of Zen "trying to flex his muscle," said Chan. Traditionally, cardinals were permitted to bring approximately ten family members and friends to participate in this special occasion, followed by a brief -- perhaps ten second -- opportunity to greet the Pope and take a photo. Unlike the other cardinals in attendance, however, Zen chose to make his moment a high-profile media event, taking several minutes to introduce former Democratic Party Chairman Martin Lee and "Apple Daily" publisher Jimmy Lai to Pope Benedict (ref A). With a large Hong Kong media contingent present, Zen's actions overshadowed the other cardinals present at the ceremony.

17. (C) Chan said Zen's actions have not gone unnoticed by the Pope. During an early June trip to Rome, although Zen clearly indicated his desire for a private audience, Pope Benedict did not schedule a meeting. Chan denied, however, that there was any rift between Zen and the Pope, and said Zen was not worried his relationship with the Pope, especially since the two men were "theologically aligned."

The Status of Religious Freedom in Mainland China

18. (C) According to Chan, who spends half of the year in China conducting religious research, there has been no noticeable increase or decrease in harassment, nor has he detected any new patterns in Public Security Bureau arrests. Implementation of new religious affairs regulations, effective since March 2005, has been at best mixed, primarily because officials at the local and provincial levels paid little or no attention to religious issues. The new regulations technically had eased registration of religious organizations, such as house churches, by not requiring affiliation with the official Three Self Protestant Movement

(TSPM). However, the law had been "rushed" and implementation at the local levels was a "big mess." Chan believed the religious reform "works on paper," but after one year there is still uncertainty over what is expected at the provincial and local level Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) offices. For example, it was not clear whether the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) would require each province to designate a RAB official to monitor and oversee each newly registered group. For many cash-strapped localities, implementation of these new religious regulations was simply not a priority.

¶9. (C) Another concern of the PRC Government, said Chan, was the question of how to monitor the expansion and diversification of religious activity in China. The Central Government had been extremely interested in a 2004 scholarly article Chan had published on "China's Socioeconomic Changes and Implications for the Religion-State Dynamic in China," which Chan said had been widely circulated among the Chinese leadership. (Note: The article can be downloaded at "lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2004/2CHA-FIN3.pdf" End Note.) In this article Chan argued that, as China entered the World Trade Organization, Chinese society would become increasingly exposed to a more international understanding of religion's role in society. Furthermore, with the return of overseas Chinese people and the proliferation of foreign businesses in China, the PRC Government would be forced to adjust their understanding of the relationship between religion and the state. Chan concluded that the "Chinese Government should realize the importance of religious liberty in establishing a stable social environment. It should adopt a new policy towards religion by loosening its internal and international control over religion."

¶10. (C) Chan also noted that the Central Government had in recent years tolerated the growth of several religious groups not among the five officially recognized religious groups (Buddhist, Daoist, Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant). Several groups, including the Church of Latter Day Saints, Ba'hai, and the Unification Church, had in recent years been permitted to operate in a less restrictive environment. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church recently had received permission to build a chapel in Beijing, had sent 13 Chinese Orthodox students to Moscow for theological training, and had been permitted to have Russian priests directly minister to adherents in China. Chan believed this relatively tolerant official attitude stemmed from two factors: First, the Orthodox Church has operated in a low-key manner; and second, the Chinese may have wanted to offer Russia a "goodwill

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gesture" to improve Sino-Russian ties. Of particular note, said Chan, was the fact that the Chinese authorities have, so far, not made any comments about possible "foreign intervention" by the Russia-based leader of the Orthodox Church, the Patriarch of Moscow.

Is China Endorsing Buddhism Over Other Religions?

¶11. (C) Chan noted the recent "promotion of Buddhism" by Chinese officials as a possible area of concern. In April, China hosted the inaugural World Buddhist Forum, China's first international religious gathering. Chinese officials view Buddhism as more in line with Chinese cultural values of harmony. Chan wondered whether the perceived preferential treatment of Buddhism would come at the expense of other religions operating in China.
Sakaue